

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-18

NEW YORK TIMES
6 NOVEMBER 1981

Key Aide to Wilson in Libya Described

By EDWARD T. POUND

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Nov. 5 — The American pilots and mechanics who are maintaining helicopters for the Libyan Air Force and training Libyan airmen are being directed by a former covert employee of the Central Intelligence Agency, according to intelligence officials and Americans who worked in Libya.

Because of his knowledge of aviation and aircraft, the former C.I.A. employee, Robert W. Hitchman, has become indispensable to Edwin P. Wilson, pilots and mechanics who worked for Mr. Wilson said.

Mr. Wilson is a former C.I.A. agent who has had a contract to provide pilots and mechanics to the Libyan Government. He was indicted last year on charges of shipping explosives to Libya and currently lives there as a fugitive.

When Mr. Wilson obtained a contract in late 1979 to maintain 20 Chinook transport helicopters for the Libyan Air Force, Mr. Hitchman was one of the first men he hired, the sources said.

North Vietnam Rescue Missions

Mr. Hitchman, who is in his early 50's, worked for the intelligence agency during the war in Southeast Asia, according to American intelligence officials. Associates at the time said his duties included flying rescue missions for American pilots shot down over North Vietnam, according to the sources.

He is a Californian with 30 years' experience flying fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, often under dangerous conditions. He originally signed on with Mr. Wilson as a test pilot and instructor, the sources said, but was running the Chinook project within a year.

Last week, a man who identified himself as Mr. Hitchman answered Mr. Wilson's telephone in Tripoli, cursed a reporter, accused The New York Times of

"printing lies" and refused to answer questions.

Repeated calls to Mr. Hitchman this week went unanswered. His wife, June, who lives in San Bernardino, Calif., declined to be interviewed and said she did not know her husband's whereabouts.

Complaints by Former Employees

Mr. Hitchman, who has a reputation for ruggedness and occasional flamboyance, did not endear himself to many of his employees, and some of them returned home recently complaining that he failed to pay them as much as he had promised when they were recruited.

The Chinook maintenance program, along with Mr. Wilson's employment of British pilots and mechanics to fly and maintain Libyan-owned C-130 Hercules cargo planes, is vital to the Libyan military, according to those who have worked there. Both aircraft were heavily used by Libya during its intervention in Chad last year.

Mr. Hitchman, who is known within the Wilson organization as "China Blue," seemingly has become indispensable in the last year. Mr. Wilson is not a pilot and knows little about aircraft, according to former employees. Associates of both men said they did not know each other until Mr. Hitchman arrived in Libya in November 1979.

Fighter Pilot in Korea

It is not precisely clear when Mr. Hitchman joined the intelligence agency. He was a Marine Corps fighter pilot in Korea, according to accounts he has given associates, and he went to work in 1981 as a pilot for Air America, a commercial airline that was owned by the C.I.A.

American intelligence officials said that Mr. Hitchman was a C.I.A. employee when he worked for Air America. He left the airline in the mid-1970's and is no longer associated with the intelli-

gence agency, the officials said.

Air America pilots were engaged in the risky job of supplying remote refugee camps and transporting troops in Southeast Asia in the 1960's and 1970's.

Mr. Hitchman was initially based in northern Thailand. In 1965, according to associates in Air America, he flew search and rescue missions in North Vietnam for American bomber pilots who were shot down.

Billy L. Pearson, a South Carolina pilot who flew for Air America, said that the rescue missions were often dangerous and that Mr. Hitchman opted out after a particularly harrowing helicopter flight and "ended up in Saigon as the chief pilot of helicopters, basically sitting at a desk."

Evacuation From Saigon

Nonetheless, Mr. Hitchman distinguished himself in 1973, according to Mr. Pearson and others, when he and other helicopter pilots helped evacuate Americans from the roof of the United States Embassy in Saigon when Americans pulled out of Vietnam.

In Libya, Americans who worked for Mr. Hitchman said he seemed willing, even eager, to take on tough assignments.

Some Americans who worked in Libya said that Mr. Hitchman did menial work for Mr. Wilson, in addition to his other duties.

Lloyd D. Jones, who was chief of maintenance on the Chinook program, said that Mr. Hitchman had said he was a millionaire and owned an apartment complex in San Bernardino.

Mr. Hitchman may soon be out of a job if Mr. Wilson fails to get his Chinook contract renewed. The contract expired Oct. 1 and, according to several Americans, has not yet been renewed by the Libyan Government.